

The Concept of the Messiah in the Old Testament

By Randall Price

The record of messianic fulfillment that appears in the New Testament presumes a prior revelation of prediction in the Old Testament. In like manner, the use of the term "Messiah" (as well as the concept of the Messiah) reflects the development of the messianic idea expressed in seminal form in the Torah and Writings and expanded in the Prophets in accord with the hermeneutical principle of progressive revelation.

The Hebrew word *mashiach* ("anointed") is used in the Old Testament to identify a person in special relationship to God. The non-technical use of the term is simply to designate "one anointed" [with oil and/or the Holy Spirit], but especially one who had been set apart by God and enabled for a special task. For example, the term is employed variously with respect to *kings* (Saul): 1 Samuel 24:7, 11; 26:9, 11, 16, 23; 2 Samuel 1:14, 16 (cf. 1 Samuel 2:10, 35; 12:3, 5; 16:6; Psalm 28:8), (David): 2 Samuel 19:22; 22:51; 23:1; Psalm 2:2; 20:7; 84:10; 89:39, 52; 132:10, 17 (cf. 18:51), (Solomon): 2 Chronicles 6:42, (Zedekiah): Lamentations 4:20; of *patriarchs*: Psalm 105:15; 1 Chronicles 16:22; *foreign rulers* - Cyrus, the Persian king: Isaiah 45:1; *Israel*: Habakkuk 3:3 (cf. Psalm 28:8); *priests*: Lev. 4:3, 5, 16; 16:15; and *prophets*: Psalm 105:15; 1 Chronicles 16:22.

The use of the term *mashiach* with respect to these divinely appointed positions (and particularly those of prophet, priest, and king), allow for the greater embodiment of these offices by a distinctly predicted "Anointed." In this light, the Greater Prophet spoken of by Moses (Deut. 18:15), the unending priesthood of Melchizedek (Gen. 14:18-20), and the eternally enthroned seed of David (2 Sam. 7:12-16; 23:1-3, 5) merge within the growing development of the messianic concept.

The connection of the term "Messiah" as applied to an anointed king appears especially strong, and was used in a prophetic sense of the coming Davidic ruler. Both Second Samuel and the Psalms refer to King David as the "anointed one" (*mashiach*) whose descendants will rule forever (2 Sam. 22:50-51 = Psa. 18:50-51). In addition, the concept of a universal messiah is seen in texts that give to the Davidic house dominion over foreign nations (2 Sam. 22:44-51 = Psa. 18:44-51; Psa. 2:7-9). In the prophetic writings the messianic concept has a special reference to God's promised Davidic ruler who will restore Israel to the divine ideal (Isaiah 9:7; Jeremiah 23:5-6; Ezekiel 34:23-24; 37:25; Amos 9:11-12). Psalms 2 (vss. 2-6, 7-9) and 89 (vss. 3-4, 20-29) depict a divinely appointed king messiah (or "anointed") who will destroy God's Gentile opponents and as His representative will reign over the nations. The pre-exilic prophet Isaiah likewise predicts a future Davidic Messiah who will smite Israel's enemies and rule in justice over the nations (Isa. 11:1-10). The post-exilic Chronicler also speaks of a Davidic ruler-restorer who will rebuild the Temple, to whom God would be Father without the need for correction, and who will serve as regent in God's kingdom (1 Chronicles 17:11-14).

It appears that the return to Judah after the exile and the re-establishment of the Davidic dynasty broken by the Babylonian captivity (cf. Zech. 4:7-10), were at first considered not only a national restoration (Ezek. 36:24; 37:12), but as a prelude to the expected messianic advent that would usher in spiritual restoration (Malachi 4:5-6; cf. Ezek. 36:25-27; 37:14). However, despite the efforts of "anointed" priests and prophets, as well as "anointed" foreign rulers who aided the return and rebuilding

(Cyrus: Isaiah 44:28-45:13; Ezra 1:1-11; Darius: 4:5-6:14), the post-exilic community came to realize that the prophetic ideals of restoration had not been met and that spiritual restoration (and the promised "Anointed") still lay in the future. For example, the post-exilic leader and restorer of the Temple, Zerubbabel, although of Davidic descent, could not rule as king under a Persian administration (only as a governor or satrap, cf. Hag. 1:1, 14; 2:2, 21). For this reason Zechariah predicts that the *zemach* ("Branch"), an apparent messianic expression, will build the restoration Temple in the time of spiritual fulfillment (Zechariah 6:12-14).

If we continue to trace the concept of Messiah through the Old Testament without dependence on the term *mashiach*, we find that not only is there portrayed a royal "Son of David," and a redeemer/restorer of Israel, but also a heaven-sent ruler who is able to bear titles of divinity (Isa. 9:6-7) and to restore the whole of the created order (Isa. 11:1-2). There is also more elaboration on the priestly role, for Psalm 110 refers to a figure who is a combined King-Priest (cf. Zech. 6:9-13), while Isaiah depicts a Priest-Servant, cleansing the Nation through priestly atonement (Isa. 52:13-15; cf. Lev. 4:6; Ezek. 43:19-20). Furthermore, and perhaps most importantly, the concept of the Messiah's coming is reserved in the Old Testament for the Last Days (cf. Jer. 33:14-18; Isa. 59:16-20). In this period the messianic advent apparently comes after (and in response to) a time of distress that will come upon Israel (Deut. 4:30; Jer. 30:4-11).

The technical use of *mashiach* for this predicted figure appears in Daniel 9:25 as *mashiach nagid* ("anointed prince" or "Messiah the Prince") and is regarded as the most explicit usage in the Old Testament. However, as presented above, the inexplicit (and infrequent) use of this term in the Old Testament for a distinct prophetic individual does not mean that Israel lacked a clear concept of the Messiah. It simply means that the technical designation for this concept had not crystallized until late in the Second Temple period. In this regard a figure such as the Danielic "Son of Man" (Daniel 7:13) was increasingly seen as messianic as the political situation in the Second Temple period compelled Jewish interpreters to search out Old Testament prophecies to expound the messianic concept.

The Concept of Messiah in Early Judaism

When the Hasmonean dynasty effected national independence (163 B.C.), their priestly rulers at first carefully avoided assuming the title of "king" (which politically had been reserved for the Seleucid monarchs, and prophetically for those of the true Davidic dynasty). The failure of the post-exilic community to experience restoration, coupled with a growing spiritual defection among the priestly leaders, exemplified by Alexander Jannaeus (103-76 B.C.) acquiring the title of king in addition to that of high priest and the imposition of a cultural Hellenism, provoked the earnest desire in opponent parties (such as the Pharisees and the Qumran sect) for a God-sent ("anointed") King and Priest to restore the legitimate order (Davidic monarchy and Zadokite priesthood). This messianic anticipation became even more pronounced with the loss of Jewish sovereignty through the Roman conquest (63 B.C.) leading to the expectation of a national king who would affect political and spiritual redemption.

Stimulated by oppressive religious and political conditions, this messianic hope during the intertestamental period expressed itself in late Second Temple Judaism through a development of the prophetic concept of messianic deliverance in the eschatological age. Jewish apocryphal and pseudepigraphal apocalyptic literature of this period contain explicit references to the Messiah that will

appear at the end of the age to wage the messianic wars, defeat Israel's adversaries, restore the nation and priesthood, and rule on a universal scale.

In the apocryphal work known as *The Wisdom of Ben-Sira* (or *Sirach*), composed by a professional Jerusalem scribe whose proper name was *Yeshua'* (Jesus) about 180 B.C., recorded a prayer for the deliverance and restoration of Israel through divine intervention (36:1-17). While in this prayer God appears to act alone, the expression "the Lord and His anointed" appears later (46:19), with reference to 1 Samuel 12:5 (where both figures are mentioned). Still later, Ben-Sirah praises God "who makes a horn to sprout for the house of David and elects the sons of Zadok to be priests" (51:12). These words, most likely based on Psalm 132:16-17, present one of the foundational messianic ideas that will be seen in the Dead Sea Scrolls, that of a Davidic and a priestly Messiah. This royal-priestly theme is again evident in the apocryphal book of *Jubilees* in its use of the biblical account of Isaac's blessing of Jacob's sons Levi (*Jubilees* 31:13-17) and Judah (*Jubilees* 31:18-20). Levi and his son's descendants are depicted as judges and teachers of the Law, ministering in the Sanctuary and executing righteousness (30:18). Judah, however, is said to receive power to be Jacob's help, and through his righteousness will bring peace for all Israelites. To him it is said: "A prince shall you be, you and one of your sons" (30:19-20). In addition, this future Davidic king will be ruler over an Israel that is both a priestly and a royal nation (33:20).

The concept of the Messiah as a "son of man" after the figure in Daniel 7:13 is expressed in a section of the apocryphal book of 1 Enoch known as *Similitudes*, which has been argued to have a date as early as 40 B.C. While we will deal more with this messianic title in the next chapter, it should be noted that scholars have found in *Similitudes* four features for this figure: (1) it refers to an individual and is not a collective symbol, (2) it is clearly identified as the Messiah, (3) the Messiah is preexistent and associated with prerogatives traditionally reserved for God, and (4) the Messiah takes an active role in the defeat of the ungodly. New Testament parallels with *Similitudes* (e.g., Matt. 19:28 with 1 Enoch 45:3 and Jn. 5:22 with 1 Enoch 61:8) may further attest to a mutual dependence on a common Jewish messianic interpretation (or tradition) based on Daniel's vision.

The Qumran Sect also had a decided messianic expectation. This is reflected in such texts as *Patriarchal Blessings* (*4QP Bless* 3): "until the coming of the Righteous Messiah, the sprout of David" (cf. *4QFlor* 1-2. 2:11; *4QpIsa^a* 8-10:17). The clearly expected "coming of the Messiah of Aaron and Israel" is also found in the *Damascus Document* (*CD* 19:10; 20:1). As in the Old Testament the use of the term *mashiach* in the Scrolls may refer to a prophet as "an anointed one" (cf. *IQM* 11:17; *CD* 2:12; 6:1; *6Q15* 3:4). Also following Old Testament messianic expressions are applied to a variety of figures (e.g., "Branch of David," "Scepter," "Star."). Some texts speak of "God begetting the Messiah" (*IQSa* 2:12), of the Messiah as a "first-born son" (*4Q369*), while other texts reveal the sovereignty of the messianic-King declaring, "the heavens and earth obey the voice of His Messiah" (*4Q521* line 1), and that the Messiah will "raise the dead" (*4Q521* line 12).

These brief examples, which reveal that the messianic concepts rooted in the Old Testament found development in the later Second Temple period, provided the context for the expression of messianic fulfillment in Jesus as the Messiah, and of the messianic eschatological hope, recorded in the New Testament.

Bibliography

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